



Gas cylinders await shipment from the Kandahar Airfield retrograde sort yard. (Photos by Chief Warrant Officer 3 Sulaiman Bah)

Streamlining Theater Closing Operations

Retrograde sort yards in Afghanistan have room for improvement. This article suggests several ways to improve their efficiency and effectiveness.

■ By Chief Warrant Officer 3 Sulaiman Bah

Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 4-0, Sustainment, defines theater closing as “the process of redeploying Army forces and equipment from a theater, the drawdown and removal or disposition of Army non-unit equipment and materiel, and the transition of materiel and facilities back to host nation or civil authorities.”

In the context of this article, theater closing in terms of retrograde means the removal and evacuation of materiel and equipment from bases across the Combined Joint Operations Area—Afghanistan. This includes all classes of supply both green (military) and white (nonmilitary) and the subsequent redistribution, reset, disposal, or return to the Army supply system of that materiel while reposturing the theater.

Retrograde operations were successfully executed during the Vietnam War, Operation Desert Storm, and Operation Iraqi Freedom. However, the retrograde operation in Afghanistan remains enormous and varied in terms of the logistics requirements to conduct such an elaborate mission.

Lessons learned from Iraq proved invaluable to the retrograde mission in Afghanistan. Still, certain areas can be simplified to make retrograde much more effective. Specifically, improvements to the excess materiel generation and collection points at operational hubs and retrograde sort yards (RSYs) should be considered in the following four areas: centralized locations with specialized teams, supply support activities (SSAs), contractor-owned materiel and equipment, and major assemblies.

Centralized Locations

Establishing a forward-deployed, centralized location responsible for supporting units within a 50-mile radius is the key to success. This location should be capable of providing specialized teams with life support, including the necessary facilities and amenities to conduct their mission—the receiving, researching, categorizing, and packaging of materials and equipment for disposition. Specialized teams reduce the transportation requirement, allow expertise forward on the battlefield, eliminate the retrograde of waste and trash, and allow an inventory before items are moved.

Servicing forward-deployed elements at the operational hubs limits the number of trucks and drivers on the road. This also eliminates the unnecessary transportation of trash and other ma-

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Welding cylinders packaged in many different ways arrive at the Kandahar retrograde sort yard receiving section.



materials that should be disposed of at a remote location. The addition of the forward retrograde element, a non-doctrinal support element established by the 593rd Sustainment Brigade, reduced the amount of trash and waste pushed by 58 percent.

Specialized teams assembled forward should comprise a mix of key materiel identification and disposition personnel from agencies such as the TACOM Life Cycle Management Command, the Communications-Electronics Command Logistics Assistance Program, and Defense Logistics Agency (DLA) Disposition Services. These teams also should include representatives with hazardous material certification and property book accountability knowledge.

As teams did in Operation Clean Sweep at Fort Hood, Texas, and as part of Task Force Harvest in Germany, specialized teams should deploy to strategic areas to conduct small-scale operations. Rather than just segregating and packaging materiel and equipment to send to RSYs, like the mobile redistribution team mission, specialized teams will separate equipment at its location to determine its status. Having a specialized team at the point of collection will eliminate the unnecessary shipment of equipment to the RSY for redistribution to another location.

Another reason for the specialized teams is that by eliminating waste and trash, materiel will be properly identified and segregated when it arrives at the RSY. Having a specialist from DLA Disposition Services on site to direct units in placing items in the right bins will save time, manpower, and the cost of fuel. Segregated waste items should go straight to DLA Disposition Services to reduce waste processing at the RSY.

Many items come to the RSY without proper documentation. A specialized team should manually inventory and document items being shipped from their location. This will enhance property accountability and facilitate receipt processing at each section. Also, having the logistics assistance

representatives, field support representatives, and logistics support element at forward locations improves asset visibility and allows them to serve as a source of reference for the units.

Supply Support Activities

The marginalization of SSAs is another area that requires streamlining. Before the advent of the RSY, SSAs were the primary means of supply support for requisitioning and turning in serviceable and unserviceable supplies and repair parts. Now the theater RSY, instead of a supporting SSA, has largely assumed the role of accepting units' supplies. Whether units with designated supporting SSAs were intended to take advantage of RSYs or not, units bypass their supporting SSAs to turn in supplies to the RSY because they perceive it as reducing the burden on the forward SSA.

The RSY operates under a "do not turn anyone away" rule and, as a result, accepts supplies "as is" with fewer procedural requirements than the SSA. One disadvantage of this situation is that the RSY does not support customer units and does not have an authorized stockage list like the SSA does. Everything that comes to the RSY is processed in the Standard Army Retail Supply System as "found on installation" and cannot be used to fill requisitions in Afghanistan except indirectly through the Defense Distribution Depot in Kandahar. As a result, customer wait time increases and the equipment remains unmoved.

After materials are processed, they are labeled as excess. The disposition does not fill any requisitions. Unlike the RSY, the SSA is set up to provide units with the right stock. Units not affected by base closure and that have a supporting SSA, should turn in their excess and "found on installation" items to that SSA. By doing so, requisitions that are due-in to the SSA or the supporting units can be instantly filled from these turn-ins. Customer wait time and requisition wait time can be reduced significantly based on the availability of the stock, greatly alleviating stress on supply chain.

White Materiel

The amount of white materiel is comparable to green materiel in theater. Although there are standard procedures for processing and disposing of green materiel, white materiel poses significant issues. Disposal of white materiel should be handled by an organization other than the RSY.

The sheer volume of white materiel often makes cataloging a challenge. After being cataloged, the items still must be processed, packaged, and disposed of. The RSY accepts both green and white materiel, challenging efficiencies in both systems. Although some procedures are similar for dealing with both types of materiel, there are also vast differences, such as in national stock number items versus nonstandard part number items and Army-wide cataloging versus contractor cataloging.

As the retrograde mission continues with other units, we anticipate changes as business procedures and practices are implemented. Most of the white materiel will be either redistributed or disposed of in theater. If cost effective, some of these materials will be retrograded out of theater back to the United States.

Major Assemblies

Major assemblies, such as engines, transmissions, and generators, are another area that requires simplifying. No facilities are available to accept these assemblies, so RSY personnel, along with a logistics assistance representative, conduct initial diagnostics to determine whether the item is economically repairable or not. In most cases, serviceability is determined by a mere visual assessment of the item's condition. Such determination is unreliable until a

sanctioned diagnostic test is done.

Transporting equipment to the depot would cost less if units shipped only items that are economically repairable and disposed of the rest. A facility capable of draining, testing, crating, and shipping would relieve the RSY and the LAR of having to guess at serviceability and repairability.

Streamlining the four areas highlighted above will enhance retrograde operations and facilitate output and velocity. Establishing a central location forward with the right mix of specialties would provide the means to collect and consolidate materials and equipment. Specialized individuals or teams available on site would eliminate unnecessary confusion, produce better products, and save time and money.

To increase redistribution efforts within the Combined Joint Operations Area-Afghanistan, units not affected by base closure should continue to use their supporting SSAs for supply support. Units and contractors should continue to improve their green and white equipment processes both external and internal to the RSY. Finally, a facility equipped to handle major assemblies—from diagnostic testing to draining, cleaning, crating, and shipping—is important in determining the correct disposition of materiel. These four areas of improvement would increase retrograde velocity and decrease waste and costs.



Major end item assemblies, such as engine parts, wait to have fluids drained and purged before shipment from the Kandahar retrograde sort yard.

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